

A Never-ending Story: From the History of Swiss Graphic Design to Swiss Graphic Design Histories

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This publication builds upon the results of the research project “Swiss Graphic Design and Typography Revisited.” Involving twelve researchers from seven Swiss universities and twelve associate researchers, and having a duration of four years, it is the largest academic research project in the field of design ever funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation—the scientific research support organization mandated by the Swiss Federal Government.¹ This project focused on Swiss graphic design and typography and their ongoing legitimacy, reputation, and status, in three sub-projects: “Principles of Education,” “Networks of Practice,” and “Strategies of Dissemination.” It did not consider the outputs of the disciplines of graphic design and typography in Switzerland as a monolithic label or style, but as a multi-faceted construction within an international discourse. This was taken into account by the team’s Swiss and foreign researchers, who collaborated in mixed research groups. They produced various small-scale narratives that together offer a more complete, flexible interpretation of the subject than has been the norm in the extant literature, and that question the existing canon of Swiss graphic design in a variety of ways.

These small-scale narratives are made public in the present four-volume publication. It constitutes an appraisal of the status quo of Swiss graphic design and typography, and by no means aims to offer the final word on the history of Swiss graphic design. Instead,

it provides readers with a comprehensive view of what has long become a canonical artifact thanks to the international significance of Swiss practitioners and Swiss curricula, and the impact of Swiss public graphic design collections and state-led strategies for the promotion of design. Readers are invited to make their own way through the four volumes, and are supported by a system of keywords that connect the contents of the different volumes, from the image-centered *Visual Arguments* to the interviews and oral sources in *Multiple Voices* and the terminologies of *Tempting Terms*. References to all cited sources are found at the end of the present volume. Our keywords also reflect the complexity of the social and cultural networks that constitute the historiography of graphic design and typography.

An academic approach

The roots of the present research are to be found in the project “Mapping Graphic Design History in Switzerland,”² which examined the construction of graphic design history in publications and exhibitions edited or curated in Switzerland from 1925 to 2012. Publications and exhibitions were registered in a database and made accessible as an interactive timeline alongside interviews with relevant personalities. In order to discuss the results of this project, its team planned a conference for 2014 whose presentations would deal with Swiss graphic design history from a contemporary academic perspective.

This symposium, which bore the same title as the project, was held on February 27, 2014 at the Bern University of the Arts HKB. Besides a keynote speech by Teal Triggs, the symposium offered ten papers by scholars from the German, French, and Italian-speaking parts of Switzerland. Participants were selected following a survey of research projects in Switzerland that focused on historical aspects of graphic design.

At the close of the day, a workshop was held to encourage further collaboration, to exchange ideas, and to evaluate possibilities for a cross-institutional research project. This workshop laid the foundations for the present extensive research project, which from the start was intended to adopt a collaborative, comprehensive, multi-perspective, methodologically varied, and historically informed approach to explore the meaning and status of so-called “Swiss Graphic Design and Typography.” After a number of joint working sessions, an application for a Sinergia grant from the Swiss National Science Foundation was submitted in January 2015. “Swiss Graphic Design and Typography Revisited” started in October 2016.

The book *Mapping Graphic Design History in Switzerland* was published in 2016 by Triest verlag.³ It includes peer-reviewed, revised papers from the conference that were complemented by newly selected essays in order to provide an even more extensive overview of research into graphic design history in Switzerland. In its discussions of theoretical and methodological approaches to historical research on graphic design, it forms an important basis for “Swiss Graphic Design and Typography Revisited.” The book was also presented to international audiences on several occasions, which enabled us to introduce our new research project to a broad spectrum of design educators, academic scholars, and designers, and also provided us with an opportunity to establish a board of experts and a network of associated researchers.

The initial hypothesis of both the symposium and the book was that graphic design history has begun to shift towards academic research projects since the establishment of the Swiss Universities of Arts and Design with their integrated facilities for research. The ensuing project “Mapping Graphic Design History in Switzerland” reflected the then status of research that was a consequence of this shift, documenting contempo-

rary discussions and offering a critical, in-depth debate on historical issues linked to graphic design and typography in Switzerland.

The structure of the project “Swiss Graphic Design and Typography Revisited”

The workshop at the symposium of 2014 was followed by several working sessions during which representatives of each participating university developed the foundation for the current project. This traces the typical career path of a professional designer. In addition, several basic principles were laid down for this new project. We aimed to focus on processes, places, ideas, and networks instead of on people and products; and we would engage in artifact-driven case studies instead of monographic research, and on small-scale but in-depth case studies with an approach that was expertise-based instead of institution-based. The overriding subjects “migration” and “translation” were replaced by a multi-perspective analysis of the label “Swiss graphic design and typography.” In a further working session, the group finalized the project’s structure, with three sub-projects focusing on education, practice, and dissemination. These sub-projects were then allocated case studies and defined in greater detail. This lengthy process, which took more than six working sessions from February to October 2015, led to agreement on the goals and intentions of the project, and on its basic structure.

Two-and-a-half years after the initial workshop, the launch day for “Swiss Graphic Design and Typography Revisited” was held at the Bern University of the Arts HKB on October 7, 2016. The members of the research team all met for the first time: six doctoral students, six researchers, three co-coordinators, and four co-applicants.⁴ In the three sub-projects, mixed groups of researchers from the participating institutions investigated different aspects of Swiss

graphic design—its teaching, its networks, and its publication formats. To compensate for a lack of expertise in specific fields, an international board of experts was set up in addition to the research groups. This board met regularly to discuss interim results and the further development of the project.⁵

The nature of the nine case studies allowed the research team to explore the landscape of Swiss graphic design and typography, shedding light on overlooked scenes, minor stories, and often-told narratives. Researchers explored the curricula at prominent *Kunstgewerbeschulen* (schools of arts and crafts) such as those in Zurich and Basel, as well as the role of teachers who moved across national borders. Nomadic practitioners, such as Albert Hollenstein and Walter Ballmer, and their business models, the impact of professional associations, and the emergence of new, informal networks were all investigated to a similar degree in order to analyze graphic design as a profession. The dissemination of design through professional journals, exhibitions, and historiographical publications was studied in order to understand the construction of the label “Swiss graphic design and typography” and the continuities and ruptures in the discourse surrounding it.

Using methods grounded in current approaches to historical analysis and cultural theory, the researchers searched through archives, analyzed textual, pictorial, and design sources such as curricula, publications, and individual testimonies, and interviewed key figures in the field. In this manner, they were able to review existing narratives and to identify previously overlooked networks, practices, and media. The result is a critical contribution to our understanding of the emergence and current self-perception of Swiss graphic design and typography. Above and beyond this, the project helped to consolidate design history as a field of research and practice in Switzerland, and provided new, relevant findings for the international scholarly discourse on visual communication.

Disseminating Swiss graphic design

Swiss Graphic Design Histories is the main output of more than four years of research. It publishes our findings in a form that we hope will also appeal to a non-scientific audience—practicing designers in particular—and will make readily available the large amount of diverse data and sources that we have analyzed. It is structured in three volumes, besides the present one: *Visual Arguments*, *Multiple Voices*, and *Tempting Terms*. The authors and editors have taken what was long considered a consolidated success story, and present it as a multifaceted representation of the socio-cultural phenomena that lie behind Swiss graphic design and typography.

Visual Arguments analyzes rich visual documents that researchers have gathered together during the project in archives, collections, and libraries. Various case studies for the project were developed in close connection with the archival material—not exclusively graphic artifacts, but also written documents such as timetables, correspondence, minutes of meetings, regulations, and essays. The accompanying texts are not illustrated with images; instead, the visual material is contextualized through the texts, which directly precede the images. By combining visual and textual material, the publication presents arguments that are aimed equally at researchers and graphic designers.

During the project, the researchers conducted a large number of interviews with designers who have contributed to defining Swiss graphic design. The aim of *Multiple Voices* is to make extracts from those interviews and other oral sources (published and unpublished) accessible to further research by grouping them thematically. This volume assembles all of these themes into a large-scale conversation that includes multiple voices and perspectives.

Tempting Terms contains essays that refer directly to the phenomena of graphic

design in Switzerland. These terms concern the professional field and terminology of graphic design; they may be obvious and self-explanatory, raise new questions, provoke curiosity, or introduce designers or areas that the canon has usually ignored. This volume is dedicated to clearly focused phenomena, but with the potential to expand and link up with theoretical concepts or cognate disciplines beyond graphic design itself.

A never-ending story?

Our research activities have not ended with the present publication. Further individual findings from the project will be discussed and published independently by our doctoral students as part of their theses. We hope that they will continue the academic discourse in graphic design history in Switzerland, conduct further research, and ultimately assume positions from which they might pursue further topics in this vein.

However, the relevance of this project goes beyond the boundaries of the graphic design discipline. It is one of the first collaborative projects in our field to involve almost all the art and design departments at Swiss universities. This collaborative approach was particularly important in defining the transfer of knowledge from research to education, as it helps to promote a shared perspective through joint research. This experiment may be considered a success in that it did not level out differences, but instead brought people from different schools—both institutions and schools of thought—into a dialogue with each other.

It was our goal with *Swiss Graphic Design Histories* to create a historiography with sound methodologies from within the discipline in a manner that might guide, but not prescribe, a future trajectory for graphic design and typography in Switzerland. Like every research project, this one might be “finished,” but it is by no means complete.

We hope that this book will encourage many more stories to be explored, and that Swiss graphic design and typography will be constantly renegotiated—whether on a large scale (as one of the eight Swiss candidates to be awarded the status of Intangible Cultural Heritage with UNESCO),⁶ or on a smaller scale (as demonstrated impressively by members of the research team in the form of the seminar “My Own Private Swiss Graphic Design History” at the Bern University of the Arts HKB, where students were given the opportunity to formulate alternative stories of Swiss graphic design using objects from their personal environment).⁷ Such an explorative form of education and an open exchange about what Swiss graphic design is all about would not have been possible without this project.

- 1 This project was supported within the framework of the Swiss National Science Foundation SNSF Sinergia scheme, see <http://www.snf.ch/en/funding/programmes/sinergia/Pages/default.aspx> (accessed Apr. 10, 2020). For more information on the project team, see the colophon in the present volume.
- 2 The project “Mapping Graphic Design History in Switzerland” was funded by the Bern University of Applied Sciences BFH and conducted at the Bern University of the Arts HKB from February 2012 to July 2013. The project team included: Prof. Robert Lzicar (coordinator), Amanda Unger, Michael Flückiger, Prof. Dr. Barbara Bader, Prof. Agnès Laube, and Tina Anna Güntner.
- 3 Lzicar & Fornari 2016.
- 4 For more information on the project team, see the colophon in the present volume.
- 5 For a comprehensive journal of the project, see www.sgdr.ch/journal/ (accessed Apr. 10, 2020).
- 6 See “Graphic design and typography”, in <https://www.lebendige-traditionen.ch/tradition/en/home/traditions/graphic-design-and-typography.html> (accessed May 26, 2020).
- 7 See “My Own Private Swiss Graphic Design History – a Seminar and Exhibition”, in <https://sgdr.ch/journal/my-own-private-swiss-graphic-design-history/> (accessed May 26, 2020).